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# The Stuff of Contention and Care: Affective Materiality and Everyday Learning in Bristol, UK

MAGDALENA BUCHCZYK  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

KERI FACER  
University of Bristol

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## Abstract

*Drawing on fieldwork in Bristol, UK, the article resituates the increasingly popular policy framing of a “learning city” within recent anthropological debates on urban political materiality. Using research findings from fieldwork conducted in sites of informal and non-formal learning on the margins of a UNESCO Learning City, we argue for an ethnography that is attentive to the ways in which learning manifests itself in everyday life. Through three field sites—a community space, a bicycle workshop, and a contested heritage campaign—we demonstrate the significance of material culture, controversy, and care as constitutive of learning processes within urban life. Through these examples, we aim to reframe questions on the complexity of learning at a city scale as part of affect-driven knowledge and the material, embodied transmission of skill and everyday practice. By tracing how learning plays out in everyday life, we can begin to interrogate what happens beyond the neoliberal forms of educational governance, and the extent to which the everyday practices challenge or reinforce top-down formulations as well as potentially transforming forms of knowledge production. [Learning; City; Materiality; Affect; Everyday; Ethnography; Heritage; Skill]*

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## Introduction

On a gray February morning in 2017, we heard from a Bristol community center volunteer about a demonstration celebrating “One Day without Us,” a national day of solidarity with migrants in the UK, taking place in the city’s harbor area. Late afternoon, the crowd gathered in the windy dockyard. The participants, dressed for the rainy rally, held a number of placards with anti-racist, anti-Brexit messages such as “Migrants Welcome Here” and “No to Islamophobia, No to War.” The assembly chanted “refugees welcome” to the rhythm of the drums and cheered the passionate opening speeches. As it was getting dark, the succession of talks touched upon the problem of anti-migration attitudes resulting from the Brexit vote. One demo speaker talked passionately about the rising wave of populism: “We have the precedent of history and we have to learn from that precedent.” He urged the crowd

to take this lesson back to their workplaces, communities, colleges, and schools.

Following Blum's (2019) call for re-engaging anthropological research with the study of learning, this article explores the everyday practices of learning in a city. The language of learning is becoming ubiquitous in planning offices and municipal institutions, as well as among policy makers, development consultants, and urban scholars (Campbell 2012; Longworth 2006). There remain, however, deep conceptual challenges to both theorizing and studying learning in the city (see Facer & Buchczyk 2019b).

This paper contributes to urban ethnography by highlighting the overlooked affective and material dimensions of learning in the city. In the first section, we introduce the context of our study on informal and non-formal learning at the margins of, and in dialogue with, the Bristol Learning City. We then go on to describe three sites in Bristol to explore how learning in a community center, a bike workshop cooperative, and an urban decolonization initiative are enabled by material culture, contestation, and care. This article demonstrates the relationship between everyday learning and affective urban materiality (Pilo' & Jaffe 2020).

## Methodology and Fieldwork

This paper stems from ethnographic research conducted in the city of Bristol, UK, between 2016 and 2018. Bristol is a city located in southwest England, with a population of about 450,000. This economically prosperous city was built on the success of its harbor and merchant past, and, more recently, on the electronics, aerospace, and creative media industries, with the city-center docks redeveloped as cultural hubs and heritage sites. In terms of formal education, Bristol has over one hundred infant, junior, and primary schools, more than forty secondary schools, two universities, a highly educated and skilled workforce, and 35,000 full-time students. It is estimated that 46 percent of Bristol residents are qualified to degree level. At the same time, the city is unequal and gaps in formal educational attainment are very significant. A child born in a wealthy area of north Bristol is six times more likely to go to university than a child born in the east. The life expectancy difference between the affluent and poor areas of the city is sixteen years. Bristol residents from ethnic minority backgrounds continue to be disadvantaged in multiple areas, from education to health and employment.<sup>1</sup>

The context of the fieldwork was the announcement of Bristol's UNESCO Learning City status. The UNESCO Learning City initiative focuses primarily on formal education and employability. In addition, the scheme includes "learning in the community" activities that involve specific actions such as improving reading amongst children or organizing events such as a Lifelong Learning Festival or job fairs. Our work stemmed from an impression in the communities that the program

overlooked many forms of learning that happen in the neighborhoods. Thus, the project has been developed in dialogue with but also at the margins of the Learning City program as an exploration of everyday learning phenomena in the city. For UNESCO, learning is a “psycho-social process consisting of the individual acquisition or modification of information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competencies or behaviors through experience, practice, study or instruction” (IBE-UNESCO). We see learning as an intrinsic part of urban life (e.g. Simone 2011; Ward 1990) that enables expanded possibilities of action through processes of qualification, subjectification, and socialization (Biesta 2012; Fenwick & Edwards 2013). Rather than an ethnography of the UNESCO Learning City itself, this research therefore explored learning phenomena in an integrated way, allowing for sites of research to emerge through connections, trajectories, and networks undertaken by learners and the activity leaders.

This article draws on eleven months of fieldwork consisting of participant observation, conversations, and over sixty in-depth interviews with residents, participants and activity leaders, community organizers, local authority and civil society staff, volunteers, and activists operating in Bristol neighborhoods. The research followed learning in the city through participant observation in a range of informal learning settings such as voluntary organizations, activist networks, community kitchens, and city farms, as well as elite learning organizations, city festival offices, and co-working spaces (Marcus 1995; Pierides 2010). Fieldwork tracing these initiatives across the city enabled us to reflect on their thrown-togetherness and interwoven character (Facer et al. 2019; Pink 2012).

As we argued elsewhere, these dynamic spaces and gatherings, rather than distinct neighborhood locations, constitute an interconnected, informal, precarious learning infrastructure of the city (Facer & Buchczyk 2019a). The multi-sited approach provided an understanding of the myriad social lives of learning captured in socio-material co-productions and interwoven knowledge practices (Kemmer 2020). In what follows, we present ethnographic examples of two community-run centers and a cross-city campaign. Through these examples, we aim to unpick the stuff of contestation and care to enrich our anthropological perspective on how people learn in the city through affective materiality.

## Bridging the Gap in the Learning Machine: Material and Affective Learning City

**A**nthropologists have long shown that learning is situated in everyday interactions, as well as wider embodied social and environmental relations (Bourgois 1996; Ingold 2001; Marchand 2010).

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Recently, a number of conceptual interventions have sought to illuminate the complex relations between learning and urban processes. Lipman (2010) suggests that learning in the city is entwined with political economy, highlighting how educational developments continue to reshape social, economic, and spatial transformations. In Chicago, she showed that these processes are generative of contestations, negotiations, and struggles over the city itself (Lipman 2010).


Whereas in Lipman's work the emphasis is placed on the interactions between educational interventions, processes of urban transformation, and the social inequality they produce, McFarlane locates learning at the core of changing urbanism (McFarlane 2011, 70). In this view, learning in the city takes place through *translation* and *coordination* of different knowledges at multiple scales and through *dwelling*, emphasizing learning as an education of attention (Ingold 2000) and everyday ways of being in the city. McFarlane's perspective on the city as a learning machine sheds light on learning at different scales and in a range of contexts. At the same time, it disables an analysis of learning on the ground and overlooks the situated nature of learning activities and related communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). This paper, as our data presents below, shows that such reorientation to mundane learning necessitates attention to the materiality of the learning settings as well as the relationships between participants.

Pilo' and Jaffe's (2020) recent special issue of *City & Society* shed light on the political work of objects, their capacity to create dynamic and relational connections between people and urban materiality, and their ability to affect the quality of such relations. To date, research on the materiality of the city has been disconnected from scholarly insights about the affective dimensions of urban learning. Scholars have long recognized the role of affective qualities in the lives of cities (de Boeck 2015; Schwenkel 2013; Simone 2004). For Anderson and Holden (2008), emotions in cities are constitutive of particular affective topographies. If urban change can be driven by the logic of affect and its material distributions (Anderson & Holden 2008, 147), so too can the affective materiality of change be linked to the transformative learning processes.

Ash Amin demonstrated, for example, that knowledge and agency come to be distributed across the fabric of the city, and can generate charismatic crossings that exceed individual skills and capabilities (Amin 2015, 243). As O'Hare and Bell (2020) recently showed, this results in various affective encounters with a capacity to reconfigure space. Research in Rio, for example, showed that forms of affective heritage could become mobilized and translated into particular political claims (Kemmer 2020). The case of participation in Madrid's Popular Assemblies Movement showed how affected communities mobilize public space as a learning site in order to collectively re-learn the making of politics and material publics (Estalella & Corsín Jiménez 2016). We argued that taking affective materiality in the study of urban learning

seriously allows us to gain insight into how learning activities thread together social, educative, and commemorative aspects of urban life (O'Hare & Bell 2020).

## Learning and Care in the Neighborhood Center

n a freezing, drizzly January day, we are trying to escape the biting cold while following a group of young mothers on their way to the community center. The space is setting up for a drop-in crèche. Today the activities are designed as a “messy play day.” As we join the young crèche assistant in distributing pots of glitter and play-dough around the two workshop tables, Lottie, an older staff member, explains:

Every activity in group has a learning outcome, a learning intention, from babies to 5. So that's a big one. Parents learn to mirror, role model. We do a lot of mirror play with parents and if we notice somebody might be lacking a parental skill... they might not be engaging... they might find it hard, they might not have been played with as a child themselves... so the girls will model that, and then encourage the parents coming in with the conversation (Lottie [pseud.] 2017).

Around ten in the morning, more parents and grandparents with toddlers start flocking to the space. Some engage in prepared activities, such as decorating the “stained glass” sheets with glitter or scraping paint, while others supervise confused children walking around or playing with the variety of toys distributed around the two rooms.

The variety of activities are designed to facilitate contact between parents across the neighborhood. Throughout the building, there is a rush of activity—from a family center for small children, a theatre rehearsal, job advice, a computer skills course, an outdoor learning youth initiative, and social care and advice for minority groups. The center also connects to other venues and initiatives across the neighborhood and city; it hosts an adult education school, and works with a local medical and community support space offering a range of social and support groups, counselling services, and art and wellbeing activities as well as activism. The connections developed in the crèche are often informal and further developed through forms of socializing such as a parental WhatsApp group for exchanging information and advice.

In the reception room of the Family Center, there is a closed-off area for smaller toddlers. Parents from Poland, Thailand, Spain, Afghanistan, Sudan, and the UK sit between the children, chatting leisurely and discussing the forthcoming after-school club. At some point, the conversations turn personal—two mothers start complaining about their relationships with their in-laws. Kanya complains about the difficult relationship with her mother-in-law—the constant criticism, differences in attitudes to parenting, and a lack of personal space. Lottie, a staff

member, joins the conversation and starts to share her own experiences. After the session, as we collect the dishes from the children's lunch table, she is very pleased about the way the parent was able to share her problem. Lottie's particular pride about the ad hoc discussion on family challenges came from her passion for parental support. Rather than a learning activity designed exclusively for children, she saw the crèche encounter as an opening for development, support, and transformation for both children and their families.

Najma vividly remembers the family center as an opening. As we set up for a session in a refugee drop-in, she says that for her moving to Bristol from Sudan felt like a brutal rupture. When she arrived in the neighborhood, she was a novice mother with a baby in a foreign country, lacking the language skills to understand her new life or even navigate the neighborhood. In this early period, her husband worked long hours and she had to find her own way in a hostile environment. During walks in her new area, she had been subject to racist name-calling, which made her feel more vulnerable and exposed. This sense of loneliness, danger, and parental anxiety caused her to slide into a depressive state.

The situation started improving with her attendance in the neighborhood family center. She joined an informal parent group, and started taking English classes and opening up to the staff at the center. The place, she remembered, inspired and supported her. After a few months, she reminisced with excitement: "every part of it had myself in it (...) this was my second home, my mum and my country!" In the succeeding years, she spoke passionately about how she volunteered at the center; took a number of courses in health and social care, and community interpreting; and undertook work experience. She now works in another organization as a community health advisor and trainer (Najma [pseud.] 2017). She still views the center as her relocation home, a "mother" that nurtured her in her new place.

This notion of the center as a place of affective attachments (Kemmer 2020) or a sense of kinship came up during a lunchtime conversation in the café. Jo, a volunteer at the center, is a charismatic young woman wearing a tracksuit top and a foxtail hat. Over lunch, she tells us about how as a struggling parent, she too started attending the parenting program, first aid lessons, and nutrition classes. "I am still here"—she smiles as she passes a cup of tea—"keep coming back." Jo's friend Alicia, a tall, Afro-Caribbean woman in her twenties and dressed in military boots and washed-out jeans, joins the conversation. She also started there as a single mother using the crèche and family center. After a while, she began volunteering with CV writing and weekly form-filling sessions. This provided her a first step to employment in administration. She returns to support her friend and check in on the drop-in activity. Both Jo and Alice have developed a reciprocal relationship with the center—just as the center provided support and learning opportunities, they were compelled to assist the center, being continuously drawn to its myriad offerings.



Lottie has remained at the center for years, and now feels a sense of ownership:

We've created that whole environment where people can come in, and that's when they don't feel judged (...) we need to help people to progress as well, so it's about either introducing them to volunteering to give them that little bit of work experience, to give them that... something to step on because you could get stuck (Lottie [pseud.] 2017).

For Lottie, the supporting environment requires constant tending to and maintaining the center's transformational capacities. Her own pathway to the center started in the 1980s as a parent with a two-year-old. Having moved from a different area of the city, she felt quite isolated and started to volunteer, then got a job as a playgroup assistant and has been there ever since. Within the last eighteen years, she has undertaken training in community work, counselling, and teaching skills tackling domestic abuse, and drug and alcohol misuse. As the place fostered her own transformation, she has invested more of her own emotions into the center's operations. Like a nurturing mother, the center required her care.

This affective labor goes beyond the tasks and maintenance of the family center team. The family center acts as an entry point to the other services available both in the center and more widely, such as debt advice, benefits information and guidance, volunteering opportunities, healthy eating sessions, arts and mental health projects, and a range of courses and social events. This continuous physical and emotional work, as well as routine activities of connecting, maintaining, and repairing, range from weekly preparation of learning materials for family center drop-ins to enabling new forms of subjectification and socialization (Biesta 2010). The stories of four users of the center—Najma, Lottie, Jo, and Alice—demonstrate the importance of reciprocal relationships within the center as a space of affective encounters (O'Hare & Bell 2020). This environment is constituted through the painstaking, everyday labor of its volunteers and staff members, as well as the interconnections between different formal and informal forms of support intersecting at the center and radiating out into the neighborhood.

As Kemmer (2020) has recently demonstrated, affective attachments can bring about forms of collectivity through embodied knowledge. In the center, these affective encounters have been mobilized and maintained through a range of caring practices. Care entails a range of labor, material, affective, and social relations with a capacity to sustain sociality (Buch 2015, 278). Care also plays a significant role in everyday dimensions of knowledge construction and learning practices (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 100). Learning of the neighborhood center members, as well their socialization and subjectification, involved multiple affective relations of care, the painstaking labor of tending to each other, making and remaking trust, and commitment. The following section further develops the analysis on the intersection of learning and affective materiality of care and maintenance in the city through the example of a bike repair workshop in an associated neighborhood initiative in East Bristol.



## Materializing Learning in the Workshop

During our cigarette break in front of the workshop, a young woman brings yet another bike for disposal. James takes it to the pile and tells us that the bike disposal season has started. In the spring, many people start cycling again and often decide to get new bikes, he explains. This way, the workshop gets a steady supply of old models. The repair team assesses the donations, undertakes major repairs, and organizes maintenance sessions for different groups of potential bike owners. The workshop is structured as a cooperative that offers free bicycles to people who could not afford one of their own. As one of the volunteers points out, the cost of the bicycle and its maintenance might be a significant barrier to ownership.

Many of the workshop visitors cannot face the cost of bicycle parts and repairs. These new bike owners are referred from health services, substance abuse charities, housing projects, social care programs, and refugee associations—including community centers. This way, a whole network of initiatives is summoned to provide access to the bikes, and to refer to each other's services. The referral network encompasses over fifty organizations from local authorities, Wheels to Work cycling initiatives, schools, refugee centers, drug charities, and social care venues. A prerequisite of the bike donation is attendance in a bike-repair session. The workshop also works outside of its walls by setting up maintenance sessions in different parts of Bristol and the surrounding area.

On a spring weekday afternoon, four volunteers are working on individual bikes, overseen by the workshop coordinator. All are helping the bike recipients to fix their respective future bicycles. There is much banter between the coordinator and the volunteers—when one can't find a particular component, the coordinator passes it to him and says, "You could see it on Google Earth!" During a break, he emphasizes the significance of social and personal dynamics in the workshop:

obviously the technical learning—we learn how to fix bikes. And then there's lots of lessons about patience and sort of personal lessons. I think I've learnt a lot about people through being here, especially by having positions of responsibility (Coordinator [pseud.] 2017).

The volunteers, men and women, represent different skill levels—some more seasoned, proceeding with work while others consult with the coordinator. He is circulating between the different stations, selecting appropriate tools, providing ad hoc advice, working on his own repair project, and assessing bicycle donations. Like a conductor of a slightly out-of-tune orchestra, the coordinator engages in continuous task division, breaking down repair challenges into manageable tasks and allocating jobs. One newer volunteer is training his eye for detail—with the help of the more experienced workshop staff, he tries to spot the source of the problem. The volunteers are demonstrating the different steps of the repair process to the recipients in order to enable the new bicycle owners to gain the necessary

maintenance skills to keep their new bike working. The fine-tuning, tinkering, and humorous exchanges create an environment that fosters education, attention, and practice (Ingold 2000; Lave & Wenger 1991).

Adam, an asylum seeker and bicycle recipient, emphasized the importance of learning about maintenance and attentive observation of the repair process:

I think that watching people in learning is so important, by that attention to seeing how things are being done (Adam [pseud.] 2017).

Importantly, he explained, he found the bike useful for running errands as well as journeys to refugee centers and job seeking across Bristol. On bike, he was able to get to know the city itself, reach some of the more peripheral support services, and explore new neighborhoods. For Adam, the bike provided a degree of freedom—a way to not get stuck inside just four walls, to get away from his own problems, and to get out to explore the city. Bristol was the sixth UK city he'd lived in, and this time he was determined to stay. By redirecting bikes from landfills, the initiative provided Adam with a mode of sustainable transportation. A discarded bike frame transformed into a working vehicle, a practical solution to his commuter cost challenges, and sometimes it carried the promise of autonomy through independent mobility. The workshop and its bikes supported bike recipients' everyday mobility (Freudendal-Pedersen 2015) across the city, and fostered a set of skills to support and sustain it, as mentioned by a cooperative member:

it enabled us to really develop, and it's provided us with a ready kind of community to fit into. And there's lots of people cycling round here already, so that's you know... yeah it's been great for us (Cooperative Member [pseud.] 2017).

The activity enabled new capacities and skills, and facilitated a new community of practice.

In the workshop, learning to socialize within this socially diverse environment was enabled through the day-to-day routines and encounters between bicycles, the volunteers, the coordinators, and the recipients. One volunteer reflected on the role of the bicycle as a key catalyst for social encounters and learning:

the bike is kind of there, that's the thing that you're both focused on, so you've got a common thing that you're trying to achieve. You want the same thing effectively, and then you work out how to communicate around that. (...) the bikes give you that focal point that everybody's there for something to do with that, and everybody there is interested in that. So I guess therefore everybody's interested in you to an extent because you're interested in bikes, and it kind of makes it easy for people to slot in... (Volunteer [pseud.] 2017)

The bike facilitated transformative experiences for all sorts of encounters. For example, vulnerable adults learned to work systematically with

others, and newcomers learned new vocabularies as they interacted with the volunteers and other users. In addition, men and women working on their individual bikes got to share knowledge and skills, and volunteers and coordinators learned how to work with different types of people and experience challenges of inclusion. Marres (2012) and Were (2003) shed light on the material production of knowledge, demonstrating that the artefactual world inflects learning processes and everyday practice. In the workshop, the bicycle was at the center of the learning processes, enabling connection-making and driving improvisational and training practices.

The bike workshop was also a practice embedded in material politics. Pilo' and Jaffe (2020) suggested that bringing new objects, or reshaping and repurposing existing ones can be generative of new, transformed political relations and political imagination (Pilo' & Jaffe 2020, 9). Objects play a role in the processes of urban political materiality—they take part in mediating relations and challenging established norms of practice. As one workshop volunteer reflected:

Refugee families there who needed bikes and didn't know where to go and get them, so... they were being looked after by... technically by South Gloucestershire [local authority], but actually by a company who were being subcontracted by South Gloucestershire, who then actually are just there presumably to make a profit as well out of the whole thing.

Increasingly, support organizations on the ground were driven by the logic of the market. The workshop, built around discarded and repurposed objects, shared an ethos of care and skill enablement that differed from profit-oriented support services. In contrast to the dominant forms of support propagated by austerity politics, the cooperative workshop was centered on a grass-roots network of refugee support, social care, and educational community. As one of the cooperative members mentioned:

This area has a history of being engaged and active and fighting for community ownership of the space. (...) And I think that's one of the principles behind the cooperative structure. What we believe here, is that we can all learn from each other, and that's why it's important to provide the structure and space in which everyone feels empowered to bring forward their ideas and to see through their ideas, because not one person holds all the information to how something should run (Cooperative Member [pseud.] 2017).

She saw the workshop as a provider of “holistic training” about engagement, where on the one hand, nobody is obliged to be heavily involved, and on the other, the cooperative sees itself as a place where they want members to be more involved in everyday operations and decision-making. As part of the political outlook, the setting up, running, and linking of initiatives within the workshop was an ongoing reflective

practice—for example, taking into consideration the masculinist tendencies of bike repair spaces, as highlighted by one volunteer:

When I first arrived in Bristol, there was a few other places where you could volunteer. But none of them really felt that they were very inclusive. They were quite... certainly quite male dominated spaces, quite sort of geeky spaces. And when I read about this one, it felt like it had a little extra to it, that it was about bikes but it was also trying to do something much more inclusive.

The cooperative worked consciously to nurture this inclusivity, and to avoid such working cultures and tendencies. This way, it offered an alternative to the austerity politics of social care and support.

This ethos of reflexive community management and co-ownership was often juxtaposed with property-driven change and the encroaching gentrification of the neighborhood. As another volunteer reflected:

I was interested in bicycles, but interested in how they could be used to help people, rather than just something that you buy, something that people can get involved with... the community aspect, the participatory aspect of a kind of bicycle project. (...) So when I saw that there were people with learning difficulties, asylum seekers working there, all sorts of different people, different backgrounds, it felt like it that it kind of... it ticked a lot of boxes for me, it was something that I wanted to be involved with.

For one of the workshop coordinators, this non-profit participatory orientation posed challenges of sustainability but also allowed for other forms of sociability and non-competitive connections. The bike workshop was also a focal point around which new alliances, communities of practice, and political possibilities were constituted. The space had a capacity to enable alternative political imagination; to bring together people, resources, and a network of organizations for learning through everyday actions of making, repair, and maintenance.

The bike, as a central object of the learning encounter, summoned capacities and mobilized a range of sociabilities, skills, and common practices. It not only contributed to a process of socialization and subjectification for both volunteers and bike recipients, it was also part of the political work of things in this cooperative project, forging new possibilities of support and inclusion. The discarded object, transformed through attention and practice, enabled the participants to build trust and establish mutual learning, knowledge sharing, and a sense of commons. Learning occurred through affective encounters and care practices between the spaces and materials of the workshop and the different people who worked, tended to, volunteered, referred, or just attended the place. This embodied affective knowledge wove new threads between the sites and initiatives concentrated around the workshop and its networks. The next section develops a discussion on the capacity of objects to open up opportunities for learning, and to summon a materiality

of learning by turning to an example of a controversial monument in Bristol City Center.

## Learning Controversy in the Public Space

A lot of people still think about racism as you know, oh you beat up someone because of the color of their skin or you actively discriminate against them, but the way that micro-aggressions function on a daily basis is so much more subtle and embedded in our emotions in a way that we navigate through spaces.

Sitting in the bike workshop café, Chantelle talked about the embodied experiences of racism. We were in close vicinity of the Colston urban assemblage with Colston Avenue, Street, statue, Hall, and the Tower, elevated above the central part of the city. Over the last couple of decades, some Bristolians have undertaken repeated attempts to address the city's colonial traces in its streets, building names and monuments. The ongoing controversy around the legacy and continued impact of Edward Colston and other slave traders on the city of Bristol is particularly visible in the urban fabric (Böhm & Hillmann 2015; Chivallon 2001; Morgan 1998).

Colston was a Bristol-born merchant of the Royal African Company, a philanthropist, and a member of parliament. He endowed schools and almshouses, and his name is commemorated throughout several Bristol landmarks and streets, three schools, and the “Colston bun”—a sweet made with dried fruit. Colston has for many decades been at the heart of tensions and dynamics surrounding the remembering and forgetting of how Bristol makes sense of its colonial and slave-trading history (Casbeard 2010; Dresser 2009; Otele 2012).

Figure 1 shows the statue of Edward Colston with a series of posters attached to the base of the statue, labeled “slave trader,” “murderer,” and “human trafficker.” This intervention took place in March 2016 and was accompanied by a series of small-scale protests alongside celebrations related to Colston and the buildings named after him. An accompanying online description of the action surrounding the statue explained that this was an act of “nuancing” the monument in order to make the forgotten aspects of Colston’s legacy visible.

A few weeks after the relabeling, the statue had once again been vandalized—its face was painted white, leaving an eerie glow. Protesters over the years engaged with the monument in different ways—some put shackles on it, or placed a parking cone atop its head. The artist Hew Locke, commissioned by Spike Island, turned the statue into a fetish: he covered the photograph of the statue in kitsch jewelry and trinkets to make Bristol’s founding father into a devotional object full of cheap luxury.



Figure 1. Edward Colston statue with descriptions challenging his legacy in the city. Photograph by Magdalena Buchczyk. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Since then, a new plaque, entitled “Unauthorized Heritage,” was mounted on Colston’s statue: “This commemorates the 12,000,000 enslaved of whom 6,000,000 died as captives.” In 2018, the statue became part of another installation. On October 18 2018, marking Anti-Slavery Day, one hundred human figures were placed in front of the statue. Their composition evoked the image of West African slaves needing to be squeezed on board ships on the way to North America and the Caribbean. The description stated “here and now,” and listed some of the jobs done by forced workers today—from fruit pickers to nail bar and sex workers.



These affective expressions and temporary interventions continue to animate the space. As a result of such repeated interventions, local authorities started working on a new plaque that acknowledges the slavery-related chapter of Colston's biography. The text proposed by the City Design Group of the Bristol City Council reads as follows:

As a high official of the Royal African Company from 1680 to 1692, Edward Colston played an active role in the enslavement of over 84,000 Africans (including 12,000 children) of whom over 19,000 died en route to the Caribbean and America.

Colston also invested in the Spanish slave trade and in slave-produced sugar. As Tory MP for Bristol (1710–1713), he defended the city's 'right' to trade in enslaved Africans. Bristolians who did not subscribe to his religious and political beliefs were not permitted to benefit from his charities.

These moves to recontextualize the statue were blocked by local elites and Conservative politicians.

Another result of the fervor around the Colston name and its cult in the city (Dresser 1998) are name changes to public spaces such as a school and a city music venue. The Colston Hall renaming process initiated discussions between those who were in favor of the changes and others for whom this represented an inadequate response to the problem of a difficult urban history. In response to the name change, a "Save Colston" petition was set up on the open-access petitions section of the city council website to reverse the planned change. Finishing in December 2018, the petition attracted 199 signatories. The heated discussion about Colston's legacy encompasses actual and virtual public space ranging from continued acts of vandalism to public art, public debates, protests, online campaigning, and everyday discussions.

It was particularly surprising to learn how many conversations could suddenly turn to the topic of Colston. For example, during a short exchange with a kitchen chef in the community center, we moved from a discussion about improvisation in the kitchen to musical experimentation. Soon, Tom was telling us about his discomfort related to attending Colston Hall. He felt that each time he went there for any musical concert, he had a feeling of a strange atmosphere; despite the excellent programming, the place always appeared cold and awkward. The location seemed to ooze the aura of its name. Surprisingly, he went on to argue that he did not agree with the change of this name as this would result in an erasure of memory. As a Bristolian with Afro-Caribbean heritage, he felt that instead of "promoting forgetting," there should be a stronger interpretation of Colston's legacy. He argued that with the name, Colston Hall should be used for educational programs about the history of slavery. For Tom, keeping Colston in the music venue in this fashion would promote understanding. This exchange with Tom was one of



many examples of emotive discussions about Colston at the margins of other conversations.

This contested engagement and emotional responsiveness of the residents on both sides of the debate can be illustrated by the example of Bess, a local teacher turned history activist. She has become involved in the Countering Colston initiative through learning that children were being given Colston buns in church as part of a private school ceremony. She knew about the problematic history, but the idea of “Here, children, come into the building and have a bun” was repulsive to her. The affective power of the Colston’s ceremony started playing on her mind, producing a ripple effect and moving “sideways (through ‘sticky’ associations between signs, figures and objects) as well as forwards and backwards” (Ahmed 2004, 45). This concern about school children being given the Colston buns made her feel compelled to join a protest:

We were outside the cathedral on the morning of one of these ceremonies saying basically to the children, “They can’t make you wear a slave trader’s flower”—you know that was the kind of signs that he had—“They can’t make you eat a bun named after a slave trader”—those kinds of responses. And the school... that was... the school then basically went to the papers we think... although you know they deny it, and said you know “Protesters attack children.”

This tabloid interpretation of the protest, for Bess, was one of the distraction techniques used to trigger counter-emotions and silence the cause. They have been doing this for years, she observed, noting with satisfaction that the matter had gained a new momentum. Not only had the Colston controversy achieved a higher media profile but also more information had been made publicly available regarding his direct links with the Transatlantic Slave Trade:

Each generation brings new bits to the table, and this time it’s almost... this time the historical information is such that there’s nothing to come... those that would defend Colston haven’t got anything to come back with, and that’s kind of the difference I think.

Since the controversy became more public, a flurry of activity has been linked to the issue. Local campaigners, artists, community historians, academics, politicians, and interested residents continue to organize a range of activities, ranging from conducting historical research revealing the legacy of Colston and the history of campaigning against the celebration of his story in Bristol, to listing of the different forms by which Colston is honored, creating petitions, organizing street protests, blogging about local urban history, changing Wikipedia entries on Colston, facilitating and leading walks about the slavery-related history of the city, and making and placing placards and banners in Colston-related locations. The Royal Geographical Society has produced a “Bristol slavery trail” with a downloadable map and information. The charitable and educational organizations linked to Colston are working on addressing some of these

questions of legacy with work on current challenges such as educational underachievement among BAME children.

In the debate around the management of Colston's difficult heritage (Macdonald 2010), both sides of the argument have used deeply emotive language. As Chantelle reflected, emotional responses and white fragility are fizzing to the surface:

We need to know that we're living in a system that has valued slave owners and celebrated slave owners to such an extent that this is only changing now, you know and very reluctantly changing. We need to remember that and have a kind of broad legacy and understanding of what it means. But I think it speaks to the level of emotional turmoil that white and brown and black people have around racism for any time any action is made—there is so much reaction. Because there isn't space like to deal with the feelings that people have... and there are a lot of feelings, you know. And I think until we have more spaces to start engaging in this conversation, then it's not going to dissipate.

The controversy around Colston's urban presence constitutes an affective encounter and a critical learning moment for the city, sparking a range of practices and responses to this contentious issue.

A student campaigner involved in anti-racism activism in the city reflected on the significance of campaigning as a transformative force:

When there is a political activity I think people get exposed to it, and their ideas... even though [the city] doesn't change immediately, it does get influenced by what's happening. So slowly it changes people there. When it changes the community, it definitely changes the city itself.

In 2020, during the editing of this article, the student's words seem prophetic. Since our fieldwork in 2017, the city's struggle over Colston has been placed on a global map. On June 7 2020, as a result of the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd, the statue of Colston was toppled from its plinth, dragged by the protesting crowd along the Bristol harbor, and dropped from the docks.

On the one hand, this event was met with many voices of institutional support, including a statement from Bristol's mayor regarding the toppling of the statue as an act of historical poetry. The watershed moment of the submerging of the statue has also accelerated other long-overdue and contested interventions, including the immediate removal of Colston's name from the Hall and the Tower, as well as the erasure of dedications to slave traders from the windows of the Bristol Cathedral and another prominent church in the city. These recent developments have also been met with "tit-for-tat" attacks (e.g. the recent destruction of a tombstone to Scipio Africanus, a West African Roman slave who became a Roman general). Although the long-term consequences for the city are yet unknown, it is safe to assume that recent events have

demonstrated the importance of eventful learning and its transformational capacity (Cope 2003; Christianson et al. 2009).

Controversies involve an ongoing exploration of concerns and:

help to reveal events that were initially isolated and difficult to see, because they bring forward groups that consider themselves involved by the overflows that they help to identify. As investigations go on, links from cause to effect are brought to the fore. The controversy carries out an inventory of the situation that aims less at establishing the truth of the facts than at making the situation intelligible. This inventory focuses first on the groups concerned, on their interests and identities. It is not the result of a cold, distant, and abstract analysis. It is carried out at the same time as the actors arrive on the scene. The distribution is not known in advance but is revealed as the controversy develops, and it is precisely for this reason that the latter is an apparatus of exploration that makes possible the discovery of what and who make up society. (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe 2009, 29).

As controversies foster the participation of new actors, they change the terms of the debate and reconfigure its social landscape. This way, the concerned groups expand and bend issues, and mobilize possible links between debate problems. As controversies involve confrontations of actors and issues, they enrich the meaning of the situation or an event. Their unpredictable dynamics provoke collective and mutual learning, and facilitate explorations of new lines of inquiry (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe 2009, 33).

Controversies as stoppages of business-as-usual have a capacity to engineer “an atmosphere of social concern” (Amin 2015, 252) and can lead to significant transformations. Ash Amin (2015) provided a perspective on the ways in which such new possibilities or instances of learning arise in the moment, as in the case with the toppling of Colston’s statue. For Amin, such events have the capacity to generate a fracture in the everyday city, animate space, and create an interruption that surpasses individual skills and capabilities (2015, 243). Controversial events thus unleash eventful learning through activating negotiation, exchanges, and compromises that require developing new knowledge and ways of seeing, thinking, and acting.

Through such learning processes, controversies also affect all actors involved, bringing them into tune with each other. They distort pre-existing hierarchies and initiate revisions of one’s own position. Mutual learning can thus lead to the creation of collective projects and coalitions, resulting in the short-circuiting of divisions between lay people and representative institutions (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe 2009, 34), as in the case of the immediate decision to remove building names and church windows that once were subject to back-and-forth confrontations.

Thus, learning processes need to be understood not only as movements of the learning machine (McFarlane 2011) or as results of policy and local government initiatives (Longworth 2006) but also as part of affective practices with a potential to disrupt material politics within the

city. Yet, we also need to recognize ways in which the material politics of the city and its affective multi-directionality can be mobilized to reinforce the status quo and maintain existing order. As the Colston name is scraped off dedication panels in the Bristol Cathedral and the building façade of the Colston Tower, a question arises as to the effect of this material action on the underlying structural forces that hold the legacy of slavery in place and continue to affect lives in the city. This allows us to start asking questions as to what extent the power of affect transgresses structural forces within urban learning infrastructure, and what the long-term effects of eventful learning may be.

## Conclusion

As cities are increasingly preoccupied with initiatives and policies involving learning, education, and knowledge production, anthropology needs to engage in the debate on learning cities. As Blum (2019) argues, anthropology of learning is yet to wax. The learning city on the ground, demonstrated through practices in Bristol's community centers, workshops, and campaigning about the city's toxic heritage, has demonstrated that forces that trigger, push, and pull learning in the city are sometimes located outside formal educational milieus and policy initiatives. Our respondents in the bicycle workshop, the community center, and the long-lasting and recently explosive decolonization campaign did not know or engage with the official UNESCO Learning City program of formal educational infrastructure. Although situated at the margins of policy initiatives, these spaces and activities exercised transformational influence on their members, attendees, and other organizations across the city, providing insight into the ways by which learning as expanded possibilities of action is practiced on the ground.

This paper argues that rather than dwelling, coordination, and translation processes within a learning machine (McFarlane 2011), learning in the city is deeply intertwined with affective materiality. Refocusing on this overlooked area allows us to recognize how learning is mobilized through practices such as controversy or care, and their material entanglements. This paper shows how affective materiality plays a key role in everyday learning not only by mediating subjectivities (Körling 2020; Wanner 2016), enhancing socialization and subjectification, and constituting urban everyday life (Anderson & Holden 2008) but also transforming the city itself. Further ethnographic studies of such everyday expressions could illuminate the mundane learning city as a critical and generative project, bringing about the radical possibilities of the educational endeavor. Tracing how learning plays out in everyday life, we can begin to interrogate what happens beyond the neo-liberal forms of educational governance or the "totally pedagogized society" (Rich and Evans 2011), and the extent to which these everyday urban settings and initiatives could challenge or critique top-down formulations for

a more citizen-led learning city. Such further research on the material politics of learning in the city could also explore how learning reinforces structural forces through which knowledge and social practices are perpetuated.

This might necessitate investigation into the ways in which informal neighborhood initiatives, such as the bike workshop and the community center, continue to provide a fallback caring environment in an increasingly profit-oriented, outsourced social care sector. It might also involve interrogating the strategies by which long-established institutions use the transformative messages of anti-Colston campaigns to whitewash their own complicity in the ongoing legacy of inequality. This might involve studies into how attention is not only educated but also redirected through human and non-human actors using social media to undermine knowledge, fuel conflicts, and channel local causes to particular wider political interests. The development of ethnographic work on the material and affective capacities of the learning city, their push and pull, their transformation and adaptation, allows us to recognize the multiple and dynamic relations and practices of learning and unlearning, and their significant effects on urban lives.

## Note

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/CoDE%20Briefing%20Bristol%20v2.pdf>

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